

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 463 100

RC 023 380

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TITLE Indigenous Studies as an International Field.  
PUB DATE 2000-05-00  
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of CINSA (Canadian Indigenous and Native Studies Association) (Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, May 28-31, 2000).  
AVAILABLE FROM For full text:  
<http://www.ualberta.ca/~nativest/CINSA/CDfiles/papers/PinoRb1s.pdf>.  
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS \*American Indian Studies; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; \*Indigenous Populations; Interdisciplinary Approach; \*Role of Education; Self Determination  
IDENTIFIERS Canada; Indigenous Knowledge Systems

## ABSTRACT

This paper proposes the development of Indigenous Studies as an international field, both in the sense of advancing the discipline internationally, wherever there are Indigenous peoples, and in the sense of incorporating international perspectives into curricula. In Canada, Indigenous Studies has been and is still treated as something to be done by "experts" for others. Indigenous Studies does not exist in its own right as an autonomous discipline, has no serious academic recognition, and depends upon the paradigms and methodologies of non-Indigenous academia. A correctly conceived and correctly implemented Indigenous Studies program would address the "unfinished business of decolonization" and would produce both Native and non-Native graduates that understand Indigenous worldviews. The interdisciplinary approach to Indigenous Studies can be construed as a way of expanding universal knowledge while keep the subjects being studied marginalized from the "real" disciplines such as history and sociology. On the other hand, should Indigenous Studies become a discipline in its own right, an obvious area of focus should be the international field. An international Indigenous Studies would acknowledge the significance of Indigenous knowledge and establish international discussion on ethical issues related to land rights, natural resources extraction, and political recognition. Sections of the new Venezuelan National Constitution that give sweeping recognition to Indigenous rights are presented. (SV)

**INDIGENOUS STUDIES AS AN INTERNATIONAL FIELD**

CINSA Congress 2000

by Rodolfo Pino-Robles

In this paper I propose to touch upon the demand for, the potential, and some of the ramifications and limitations of the extension of the discipline of Indigenous Studies to the international field, in the double sense of advancing the growth of this discipline internationally wherever there are Indigenous populations, and in the sense of incorporating international perspectives into our own curricula. For reasons I hope to make clear later, I suggest that Indigenous Studies as an international field is one of the most vitally necessary moves to be undertaken by universities today. Nevertheless there are a number of considerations to be dealt with before attempting to justify this proposition.

The first arises from the assumption that Indigenous Studies is in fact a discipline. The very concept of "Indigenous Studies" suggests analysis, investigation, history, review, deliberation and criticism: in short, research and methodologies which, by and large, have been done by external "experts" for Indigenous peoples. Seen this way Native Studies connotes an interest from outside Indigenous populations to present to other outsiders how things function or do not, among these somewhat "other" distant people. A swift survey of the published academic works used in Indigenous Studies curricula in Canada reveals that the great bulk of these works are researched and written by historians, anthropologists, educators, lawyers, geographers, sociologists, etc., some of whom may be Aboriginal by birth but none of whom use methodology or approach from anything other than a **non-Indigenous** discipline. Blair Stonechild and Don McCaskill noted in 1987 that the historical origins of Indigenous Studies "lie in universities' attempts to rectify past failures by establishing programs which would accurately reflect the Native experience in Canada and attract Native people into

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universities.”<sup>i</sup> The latter statement begs the question: was Indigenous Studies created to attract Native people to the established disciplines or was it created with a view to eventually becoming a discipline in its own right? Commenting on future developments for the discipline of Native Studies at the tenth anniversary of the School of Native Studies at the University of Alberta, Department Head Frank Tough observed:

It would seem illogical to accept the need for Native Studies at the University—in other words—a recognition that Native Studies is at the very least filling gaps left by the academy, if not seriously engaged in critical and corrective perspectives, but then insist that faculty, by default or through a lack of planning, should be recruited from other disciplines. Similarly, it would be hard to imagine today that any established discipline would accept a situation in which all of its core faculty obtained their academic qualifications in other disciplines.<sup>ii</sup>

Perhaps an illustration would make the point more clearly. Would any college of engineering dare to offer to train engineers, with a faculty of mathematicians, physicists, chemists, sociologists, but not a single engineer? Such a college would be a laughing-stock, and no serious engineering student would register there. In other words, Tough is conclusively proposing that Indigenous Studies become a discipline in its own right, especially after thirty-one years of existence in Canada as a multidisciplinary mongrel.

Since its inception this discipline has experienced difficulties in reproducing itself. Yes, we agree that Indigenous Studies is multi-disciplinary; but what precisely does this mean? Is it multi-disciplinary because different “well-established” disciplines share some of their traits to shape Indigenous Studies or is it multi-disciplinary because

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<sup>i</sup> Blair Stonechild and Don McCaskill, “The Development of Indian/Native Studies in Canada,” *The First Ones: Reading in Indian/Native Studies* (1992), 2; reprinted from W. Peter Adams, ed., *Education, Research, Information Systems and the North*, (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies, 1987), 103-106.

<sup>ii</sup> Frank Tough, *The First Ten Years: A Commemorative Look at the School of Native Studies; University of Alberta, 1988-1998*, 58-61, (Winnipeg: Printcrafters, 1998), 60.

its practitioners seize and use what can be rescued from their own disciplines to serve the necessary paradigms to change and to improve the life of Indigenous communities and nations? What is the understanding of the concept “multidisciplinary”? Is it that one uses bits and pieces from existing disciplines to create “something”, like an intellectual Frankenstein? Or is one to use some, only some, of the tools, theories and methodologies of other disciplines in order to build and eventually create and develop an autonomous Indigenous Studies Discipline? After thirty one years of existence can Indigenous Studies show any advances in developing its own paradigms, or show off its graduates developing new intellectual ideas or programs as a manner of establishing Indigenous Studies as an accepted, recognized and serious academic discipline? Furthermore, where is the academic recognition of Indigenous knowledge in any of the Indigenous Studies Departments existing in this country?

Today there is little doubt that Western history needs to be retold through the eyes of the colonized. This is one of the very reasons why Indigenous Studies came to be in the late 1960's and early 1970's. But how is Indian/Native Studies as discipline going to develop if we use the paradigms, methodologies, tools, theories, and applications of non-Indigenous academia? How are we to educate Indigenous students if we continue to depend on the other disciplines while in practice negating our own? I must recall the African/American poet Audre Lorde who said: “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”. I concur strongly with Maori educator Linda Tuhiwai Smith who stated that “Indigenous peoples represent the unfinished business of decolonization”.<sup>iii</sup> My conviction is that a correctly-conceived and correctly implemented Indigenous Studies program would make possible great strides toward that decolonization; in fact this might well be the litmus test of such a program. Surely Indigenous Studies needs to address the situation of Indigenous peoples in terms of providing paradigms to solve

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<sup>iii</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books), 7.

Aboriginal's plight. Indigenous Studies cannot be just another academic discipline; it must defend the peoples it deals with.

Additionally, one of the unavoidable elements of teaching is that we model for our students. Presently a degree in Indigenous Studies is in danger of being seen by our students as a dead-end degree, since none of their professor-models holds a degree in Indigenous Studies; therefore we cannot be surprised if they do not take seriously the possibility of a degree in Indigenous Studies. Why would they? Where would they go with it? What could they do with it? If we want this discipline to be taken seriously by our students, we ourselves must take it seriously, and begin showing opening doors instead of brick walls to our graduates.. This new discipline must, should, ought to prepare our students to function keeping their Indigenousness and at the same time becoming capable of functioning within the larger society, and to incorporate non-Indigenous students and practitioners of the discipline into the realm of understanding Indigenous worldviews and perspectives. Most of the peoples of the world live in multicultural societies and this is not going to change. Indigenous Studies could prepare students - both Native and non-Native - to work in Native organizations, the federal, provincial, and municipal civil service, public health and health delivery, law and politics, Band and community administration, public relations, museum and archival work, social work and counseling, research specialization, private consulting, journalism, resource management, and, most important for the discipline itself, teaching and post-secondary education. But where are our graduates?

The reality is that Indigenous Studies is still treated academically as something to be done for others. The approach of "othering" is still prevalent in the very conceptualization of academia. Thus, we find Indigenous Studies, women studies, ethnic studies, Afro-American studies, and so on. The multi, or inter-disciplinary approach to these subjects can be construed as a manner in which to expand universal knowledge; yet, at the same time, it is a manner of keeping the subjects being studied marginalized

from the “real” disciplines such as history, geography, anthropology and sociology, for example. Academia has been based on assumptions, beliefs and notions of superiority which acted and still do act to the detriment of Indigenous populations and other marginalized populations around the globe. Political, social and economic systems, based on those assumptions, have constantly put Indigenous populations, cultures and systems under permanent stress. Maori educator and researcher Linda Tuhiway Smith advocates that Indigenous Studies practitioners should look at Western research “through the eyes of the colonized”. Tuhiway Smith also points out the complications of discussing “*research methodology and indigenous peoples ... without having an analysis of imperialism, without understanding the complex ways in which the pursuit of knowledge is deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices*”<sup>iv</sup> Already in the late sixties Brazilian educator Paulo Freire demonstrated that methods of oppression cannot serve the liberation of the oppressed.<sup>v</sup>

On the other hand, once Indigenous Studies truly becomes a discipline in its own right, an obvious area of focus should be the international field. The issues and tribulations of Indigenous peoples world-wide are rather similar. At present the planet is still undergoing a process of economic integration mostly based on the neo-liberal idea of “globalization”. This integration demands, in certain ways, the establishment of a continental (if not global) discussion regarding not only economic matters, but also social, cultural, environmental, political, and spiritual matters, in order to address the multiple and compelling issues facing societies today such as:

- the enormous and constantly growing gap between rich and poor countries, and between rich and poor people within those countries;

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<sup>iv</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>v</sup> See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogía del Oprimido*, (Mexico, D.F., Siglo Veintiuno Editores 1970). Also see Paulo Freire, *Pedagogía de la Autonomía*, (Mexico, D.F., Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1996).

- the degradation of the environment and loss of biodiversity;
- the destruction of cultural heterogeneity especially the incessant attacks on Indigenous means of life and cultures mostly in the name of so-called economic development, but also by legislation, mass media invasion, religious sects or even drug cartels.

Universities have had difficulties in addressing those issues as we all know. Somehow that was the very reason argued then for the creation of Native or Indian or Indigenous Studies.

There is no doubt that there is a growing need to recognize Indigenous knowledge, autonomy and Indigenous participation, not only within the Nation-States Indigenous peoples find ourselves, but also in the different actions and fora in the international arena and, especially, to stress the need to pay attention to those aspects that continue to be a priority for our Peoples: land, territories, resources and autonomy or self-governance. Therefore, in Indigenous Studies as a discipline, we must acknowledge the significance of Indigenous knowledge. I do not speak of tokenism; I speak of a genuine recognition of, and incorporation of, Indigenous knowledge. The very first priority of Indigenous Studies as an international field should be to establish an international discussion on ethical issues relating to land tenure and territories of Indigenous Peoples. Among the most urgent are the issues surrounding the exploration for and extraction of natural resources and, in particular, investment and development activities known as mega-projects, or—in Western terminology— economic development.

Indigenous Studies as an international field must cover a number of aspects which, in cases, are an expansion of Indigenous struggles within the Nation-States' boundaries. One of the most important issues is the aspect of political recognition. Indigenous Studies could and should provide the academic capacity and research to aid Nation-States in their relation and legal provisions for Indigenous Peoples There are very

few Nation-States which recognize in their Constitutions the ancestral rights of Indigenous Peoples with respect to possession, administration, control and arrangement of lands and territories where Indigenous peoples have lived for thousands of years with the resources that exist on those lands and territories. . One shining example is Venezuela. On January 15, 2000, Venezuelans passed a new National Constitution by a national plebiscite; it grants sweeping recognition to the existence and rights of Indigenous Peoples. In Chapter VIII, Articles 119 to 126 this new Constitution establishes, among other clauses, that:

- ✧ This National Constitution recognizes the existence of Indigenous communities as peoples who have an original right.
- ✧ It also recognizes the need to respect the social, political, economic, cultural, language and spirituality of the original inhabitants of the land recognized today as Venezuela.
- ✧ The State assumes the right to guarantee Indigenous forms of life by assuring Indigenous right to collective ownership of land. Those lands are inalienable, non-transferable, non-sequestered and non-saleable according to law.
- ✧ The very use of natural resources will take place in such a manner as to take into consideration the social, cultural, and economic integrity of Indigenous communities and only after previous consultation with those communities.
- ✧ The State recognizes Indigenous peoples' right to maintain and develop their cultural identity, world vision, values, spirituality and also to maintain their sacred grounds.
- ✧ The Constitution also advocates the need of Indigenous peoples for an intercultural and bilingual education respecting their own values and



traditions. The State recognizes traditional medicine as well as complementary therapies practiced by Indigenous peoples in Venezuela.

- ✦ Indigenous people have the right to promote, develop and maintain their own economic practices based on reciprocity, solidarity and exchange. Indigenous peoples shall have the right to define their own production as well as their participation in the national economy according to their own priorities.
- ✦ The new constitution guarantees and protects Indigenous collective intellectual property; at the same time it prohibits the patenting of resources and traditional knowledge.<sup>vi</sup>

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<sup>vi</sup> This constitution reads in its Chapter VIII:

De los Derechos de los pueblos indígenas

Artículo 119. El Estado reconocerá la existencia de los pueblos y comunidades indígenas, su organización social, política y económica, sus culturas, usos y costumbres, idiomas y religiones, así como su hábitat y derechos originarios sobre las tierras que ancestral y tradicionalmente ocupan y que son necesarias para desarrollar y garantizar sus formas de vida. Corresponderá al Ejecutivo Nacional, con la participación de los pueblos indígenas, demarcar y garantizar el derecho a la propiedad colectiva de sus tierras, las cuales serán inalienables, imprescriptibles, inembargables e intransferibles de acuerdo con lo establecido en esta Constitución y la ley.

Artículo 120. El aprovechamiento de los recursos naturales en los hábitats indígenas por parte del Estado se hará sin lesionar la integridad cultural, social y económica de los mismos e, igualmente, está sujeto a previa información y consulta a las comunidades indígenas respectivas. Los beneficios de este aprovechamiento por parte de los pueblos indígenas están sujetos a la Constitución y a la ley.

Artículo 121. Los pueblos indígenas tienen derecho a mantener y desarrollar su identidad étnica y cultural, cosmovisión, valores, espiritualidad y sus lugares sagrados y de culto. El Estado fomentará la valoración y difusión de las manifestaciones culturales de los pueblos indígenas, los cuales tienen derecho a una educación propia y a un régimen educativo de carácter intercultural y bilingüe, atendiendo a sus particularidades socioculturales, valores y tradiciones.

Artículo 122. Los pueblos indígenas tienen derecho a una salud integral que considere sus prácticas y culturas. El Estado reconocerá su medicina tradicional y las terapias complementarias, con sujeción a principios bioéticos.

Artículo 123. Los pueblos indígenas tienen derecho a mantener y promover sus propias prácticas económicas basadas en la reciprocidad, la solidaridad y el intercambio; sus actividades productivas tradicionales, su participación en la economía nacional y a definir sus prioridades. Los pueblos indígenas tienen derecho a servicios de formación profesional y a participar en la elaboración, ejecución y gestión de programas específicos de capacitación, servicios de asistencia técnica y financiera que fortalezcan sus actividades económicas en el marco del desarrollo local sustentable. El Estado garantizará a los trabajadores y trabajadoras pertenecientes a los pueblos indígenas el goce de los derechos que confiere la legislación laboral.

One of the major issues for Indigenous Studies is the advocacy for ethnic diversity within a state as a basic principle that contributes to the peaceful and harmonious development of human society. For Indigenous Peoples this is inextricably connected with conservation of the environment and biological diversity. Ethnic diversity represents the interests of preserving and developing Indigenous cultures in accordance with Indigenous principles of living. This interest can also be understood in the text of numerous national and international agreements which can assist in a better understanding of humanity regarding the importance of adopting strategies for the environment and learning respect for the fundamental rights of Indigenous Peoples. Marie Battiste and James Henderson remind us that Indigenous Peoples are “the unofficially colonized peoples of the world, the tragic victims of modernization and progress,” and they add: “In every state and educational system, we [are] underrepresented or, more often, ignored.”<sup>vii</sup>

Ideally, traditional knowledge of Indigenous Peoples should become incorporated into the curriculum and daily life of countries with Indigenous

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Artículo 124. Se garantiza y protege la propiedad intelectual colectiva de los conocimientos, tecnologías e innovaciones de los pueblos indígenas. Toda actividad relacionada con los recursos genéticos y los conocimientos asociados a los mismos perseguirán beneficios colectivos. Se prohíbe el registro de patentes sobre estos recursos y conocimientos ancestrales.

Artículo 125. Los pueblos indígenas tienen derecho a la participación política. El Estado garantizará la representación indígena en la Asamblea Nacional y en los cuerpos deliberantes de las entidades federales y locales con población indígena, conforme a la ley.

Artículo 126. Los pueblos indígenas, como culturas de raíces ancestrales, forman parte de la Nación, del Estado y del pueblo venezolano como único, soberano e indivisible. De conformidad con esta Constitución tienen el deber de salvaguardar la integridad y la soberanía nacional.

El término pueblo no podrá interpretarse en esta Constitución en el sentido que se le da en el derecho internacional.

<sup>vii</sup> Marie Battiste and James (Sa'ke'j) Youngblood Henderson, *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage*, (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 2000), 2.

populations. According to information from diverse international organizations, the world population of Indigenous Peoples is approximately 500 million, which includes more than 4,500 different ethnicities that are distributed across Asia, Africa, America, the Arctic regions, and the Pacific Ocean. These data are estimates but they provide a general idea of the rich cultural diversity contained within the community of Indigenous Peoples. At most, this wealth has been used as a considerable part of the resources that have enriched just a few. Invariably, whenever a part of the knowledge of Indigenous Peoples has been converted into knowledge that can be used to earn wealth, these benefits have not been returned for development to those who have generated the knowledge. As Battiste and Henderson state, “To exclude Indigenous peoples from the dialogue of culture, equity, and fairness is to further cognitive imperialism and systemic and direct discrimination—thus enlarging the pool of development’s victims.”<sup>viii</sup>

There are a number of critical themes and priorities which are common to the struggle of all Indigenous Nations around the globe, among them:

- the ancestral and inalienable rights to lands and territories;
- the right to their spirituality; the right to an autonomy within the Nation-States they inhabit or self-government, as it is called in countries like Canada;
- the rights of women, children and youth; the right to practice their own ways of health, education and care for the environment;
- the right to develop and practice their own alternatives for sustainable development;

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<sup>viii</sup> Ibid., 17.

- ☛ Indigenous right to cultural and intellectual property;
- ☛ the need for an evolution of national and international norms dealing with Indigenous peoples;
- ☛ the need to develop positive actions to call international attention to the cases of genocide, repression, persecution, and systematic violations of basic human rights in order to halt them.

Indigenous Studies as an international field could play a crucial role in proposing a number of recommendations to Nation-States as well as to the so-called international community, such as:

- a) all development should respect the traditions and customs of Indigenous Peoples; b) analyze the impacts of a project on the potentially affected community and involve the people in the assessment and decision making; c) use appropriate means of communication to inform Indigenous Peoples about projects in their area; d) it is essential for Indigenous Peoples that "wise elders", women and the interests of youth and children be taken into account during decision making; e) national governments and local ministries must help to protect the rights of the Indigenous Peoples in their jurisdiction.

This is essential to the continued survival of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>ix</sup>

Allow me to say a few word about Indigenous Studies as an International field in Latin America. Simply, it does not exist. Any form of studies relating Indigenous peoples is monopolized by the discipline of anthropology which still carries practices of the 1950's and 1960's. Canadian academic institutions and CINSa particularly could play an incredibly important role in supporting the establishment of Indigenous Studies in universities throughout Latin America.

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<sup>ix</sup> For further expansion on these recommendations see: International Labour Organization Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries. 1989. No 169, 28 I.L.M. 1382, and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as Agreed Upon by Members of the Working Group on Indigenous Peoples and the Human Rights Experts, 1993. E/CN. 4/Sub. 21/1993;

The development of the capitalist system and markets in these countries takes place in an incomplete form which is disconnected and dependent. Not only does it reproduce its internal conditions and relationships, but it also reproduces processes that are unable to be transformed or comprehended. However, Indigenous peoples have been able to keep their identity, not only because of their resistance, but also due to the incapacity of the national society and the capitalist system to "integrate" them. Because of this, the principal problems of the Indigenous peoples of the continent can be listed as follows: the summation and continuation of historical and current deficits; an accumulation of misfortunes that places them in the situation of extreme poverty; extreme social, economic, cultural and racial discrimination; and extreme violence and fragmentation of their communities in the process of occupation and destruction of the environment by the national society, including loggers, cattle ranchers, miners, and others who appropriate economic, political and social power from the control and concentration of land and its natural resources.

In my experience in Chiapas, Mexico I observed what is somewhat a general practice throughout Latin America: traditional Indigenous territories, whether of legalized title or not, have been invaded by ranchers, settlers (both, rich as well as poor urban people in search of some employment), businessmen (legal or illegal), the military, the church, and even non-governmental organizations (NGOs) without clear and prompt measures by the state to guarantee the autonomous administration of these territories. Capital resources and political control are concentrated in the hands of the non-Indigenous population (in Chiapas and other places, often the minority of an area's inhabitants) creating increasing dependence. Many of these non-Indigenous people in Indigenous territories become themselves intermediaries in the economic process, by identifying and solving problems and facilitating relations with financial entities and recipient communities. However, generally these intermediaries do not reinvest in the region. The exploitation of human and natural resources is carried out with the minimum

capital necessary to support their presence. This presence imposes cultural and social values that further the destruction of Indigenous thought and the loss of traditional practices regarding the relationship between humans and nature. The social structures, traditional authority figures and organizations of Indigenous peoples are systematically discredited as a strategy to impose other, non-Indigenous power structures.

With variations, this is a picture of the situation in which nearly all Aboriginal peoples find themselves. It will require more than the academy to restore balance, justice and a human-friendly environment, but the point of this paper is that the academy has a very important role to play which will effectively support the necessary change-making.

In summary, then, I believe the multiple Indigenous Studies departments in Canada need to re-evaluate their practice in order to move forward toward establishing Indigenous Studies as a discipline in its own right, and as well, to broaden their curricula and their outreach so as to offer leadership to develop this discipline elsewhere, wherever there are Indigenous peoples.

## NOTES

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